

# Primal Sound (1919)

RAINER MARIA RILKE

It must have been when I was a boy at school that the phonograph was invented. At any rate it was at that time a chief object of public wonder; this was probably the reason why our science master, a man given to busying himself with all kinds of handiwork, encouraged us to try our skill in making one of these instruments from the material that lay nearest to hand. Nothing more was needed than a piece of pliable cardboard bent to the shape of a funnel, on the narrower orifice of which was stuck a piece of impermeable paper of the kind used to bottle fruit. This provided a vibrating membrane, in the middle of which we stuck a bristle from a coarse clothes brush at right angles to its surface. With these few things one part of the mysterious machine was made, receiver and reproducer were complete. It now only remained to construct the receiving cylinder, which could be moved close to the needle marking the sounds by means of a small rotating handle. I do not remember what we made it of; there was some kind of cylinder which we covered with a thin coating of candle-wax to the best of our ability. Our impatience, brought to a pitch

by the excitement of sticking and fitting the parts, as we jostled one another over it, was such that the wax had scarcely cooled and hardened before we put our work to the test.

How now this was done can easily be imagined. When someone spoke or sang into the funnel, the needle in the parchment transferred the sound-waves to the receptive surface of the roll slowly turning beneath it, and then, when the moving needle was made to retrace its path (which had been fixed in the meantime with a coat of varnish), the sound which had been ours came back to us tremblingly, haltingly from the paper funnel, uncertain, infinitely soft and hesitating and fading out altogether in places. Each time the effect was complete. Our class was not exactly one of the quietest, and there can have been few moments in its history when it had been able as a body to achieve such a degree of silence. The phenomenon, on every reception of it, remained astonishing, indeed positively staggering. We were confronting, as it were, a new and infinitely delicate point in the texture of reality, from which something far greater than ourselves, yet indescribably immature, seemed to be appealing to us as if seeking help. At the time and all through the intervening years I believed that that independent sound, taken from us and preserved outside of us, would be unforgettable. That it turned out otherwise is the cause of my writing the present account. As will be seen, what impressed itself on my memory most deeply was not the sound from the funnel but the markings traced on the cylinder; these made a most definite impression.

I first became aware of this some fourteen or fifteen

years after my school-days were past. It was during my first stay in Paris. At that time I was attending the anatomy lectures in the Ecole des Beaux- Arts with considerable enthusiasm. It was not so much the manifold interlacing of the muscles and sinews nor the complete inner agreement of the inner organs with another that appealed to me, but rather the bare skeleton, the restrained energy and elasticity of which I had already noticed when studying the drawings of Leonardo. However much I puzzled over the structure of the whole, it was more than I could deal with; my attention always reverted to the study of the skull, which seemed to me to constitute the utmost achievement, as it were, of which this chalky element was capable; it was as if it had been persuaded to make just in this part a special effort to render a decisive service by providing a most solid protection for the most daring feature of all, for something which, though itself narrowly confined, had a field of activity which was boundless. The fascination which this particular structure had for me reached such a pitch finally, that I procured a skull in order to spend many hours of the night with it; and, as always happens with me and things, it was not only the moments of deliberate attention which made this ambiguous object really mine: I owe my familiarity with it, beyond doubt, in part to that passing glance, with which we involuntarily examine and perceive our daily environment, when there exists any relationship at all between it and us. It was a passing glance of this kind which I suddenly checked in its course, making it exact and attentive. By candlelight—which is often so peculiarly alive and challenging—the coronal suture had become strikingly visible, and I knew

at once what it reminded me of: one of those unforgotten grooves, which had been scratched in a little wax cylinder by the point of a bristle!

And now I do not know: is it due to a rhythmic peculiarity of my imagination, that ever since, often after the lapse of years, I repeatedly feel the impulse to make that spontaneously perceived similarity the starting point for a whole series of unheard of experiments? I frankly confess that I have always treated this desire, whenever it made itself felt, with the most unrelenting mistrust—if proof be needed, let it be found in the fact that only now, after more than a decade and a half, have I resolved to make a cautious statement concerning it. Furthermore, there is nothing I can cite in favour of my idea beyond its obstinate recurrence, a recurrence which has taken me by surprise in all sorts of places, divorced from any connection with what I might be doing.

*What* is it that repeatedly presents itself to my mind? It is this:

The coronal suture of the skull (this would first have to be investigated) has—let us assume—a certain similarity to the closely wavy line which the needle of a phonograph engraves on the receiving, rotating cylinder of the apparatus. What if one changed the needle and directed it on its return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound, but existed of itself naturally—well, to put it plainly, along the coronal suture, for example. What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music...

Feelings—which? Incredulity, timidity, fear, awe—which of all feelings here possible prevents me from suggesting a name for the primal sound which would then make its

appearance in the world...

Leaving that side for the moment: what variety of lines then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out? Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense.

At one period, when I began to interest myself in Arabic poems, which seem to owe their existence to the simultaneous and equal contributions from all five senses, it struck me for the first time, that the modern European poet makes use of these five contributors singly and in very varying degree, only one of them—sight overladen with the world—seeming to dominate him constantly; how slight, by contrast, is the contribution he receives from inattentive hearing, not to speak of the indifference of other senses, which are active only on the periphery of consciousness and with many interruptions within the limited sphere of their practical activity. And yet the perfect poem can only materialize on condition that this world, acted upon by all five levers simultaneously, is seen, under a definite aspect, on the supernatural plane, which is, in fact, the plane of the poem.

A lady, to whom this was mentioned in conversation, exclaimed that this wonderful and simultaneous capacity and achievement of all the senses was surely nothing but the presence of mind and grace of love—-incidentally she thereby bore her own witness to the sublime reality of the poem. But the lover is in such splendid danger just because he must depend on the co-ordination of his senses, for he knows that they must meet in that

unique and risky centre, in which, renouncing all extension, they come together and have no permanence.

As I write this, I have before me the diagram which I have always used as a ready help whenever ideas of this kind have demanded attention. If the world's whole field of experience, including those spheres which are beyond our knowledge, be represented in a complete circle, it will be immediately evident that, when the black sectors, denoting that which we are incapable of experiencing, are measured against the lesser, light sections, corresponding to that which is illuminated by the senses, the former are very much greater.

Now the position of the lover is this, that he feels himself unexpectedly placed in the centre of the circle, that is to say, at the point where the known and the incomprehensible, coming forcibly together at one single point, become complete and simply a possession, losing thereby, it is true, all individual character. This position would not serve for the poet, for individual variety must be constantly present for him, he is compelled to use the sense sectors to their full extent, as it must also be in his aim to extend each of them as far as possible, so that his lively delight, girt for the attempt, may be able to pass through the five gardens in one leap. As the lover's danger consists in the non-spatial character of his standpoint, so the poet's lies in his awareness of the abysses which divide the one order of sense experience from the other: in truth they are sufficiently wide and engulfing to sweep away from before us the greater part of the world — who knows how many worlds?

The question arises here, as to whether the extent of these sectors on the plane assumed by us can be en-

larged to any vital degree by the work of research. The achievements of the microscope, of the telescope, and of so many devices which increase the range of the senses upwards and downwards, do they not lie in another sphere altogether, since most of the increase thus achieved cannot be interpreted by the senses, cannot be "experienced" in any real sense? It is, perhaps, not premature to suppose that the artist, who develops the five-fingered hand of his senses (if one may put it so) to ever more active and more spiritual capacity, contributes more decisively than anyone else to an extension of the several sense fields, only the achievement which gives proof of this does not permit of his entering his personal extension of territory in the general map before us, since it is only possible, in the last resort, by a miracle.

But if we are looking for a way by which to establish the connection so urgently needed between the different provinces now so strangely separated from one another, what could be more promising than the experiment suggested earlier in this record? If the writer ends by recommending it once again, he may be given a certain amount of credit for withstanding the temptation to give free reign to his fancy in imagining the results of the assumptions which he has suggested.

*Soglio. On the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, 1919.*